

# Heroes in Mythology

## I. Gilgamesh

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Heroes have been with man from the beginning and are apparently necessary to the human psyche. Hero worship is not a puerile attitude of the teeny bopper, but something found in the first literature known to the world. The adventures of Gilgamesh, the world's first "known" hero, were first found in 1845 written in cunieforn on twelve stone tablets from the Assyrian city of Nineveh. These tablets were probably inscribed in the seventh century B. C. but since then many other fragments of the epic of Gilgamesh have been found at archeological sites around the Middle East. The story was known before Hammurabi set down his famous code in the 18th century B. C. as it is referred to in the prologue to the Code, and the story of Gilgamesh apparently has relationship to a real monarch of the city of Uruk of Sumeria who lived sometime around 2,700 B. C.<sup>1)</sup>

The adventures of Gilgamesh may have set the pattern for many heroes who came after in literature and mythology, or they may themselves be the descendent of some earlier tale. The things that happen to Gilgamesh, and the deeds that he performs, happen to many other heroes known to the Western world; there is the flood of Noe from the Bible and that of Deucalion from Greek mythology, the feats of strength of Heracles and Samson, Beowulf and Superman.

Judging only from his omnipresence in human history and literature, the hero is a human necessity, something which, to borrow a phrase, if it didn't exist, would have to be invented. As a matter of fact, heroes are inventions, not simply because they are mostly found in fiction and mythology, but because they must express the highest values of those who view them as heroes. This is not to say that heroes must be perfect. There may be flaws, and, in many cases, the flaws are necessary that the hero may show his greatest strength or bravery. David must be a child to show how God's strength can overcome the giant Goliath. Achilles must, of course, have his fatal heel and Superman his weakness to kryptonite. But heroes do express the highest values of society and the stories of heroes express the ideals of a society toward life.

Epic literature and mythology is often tragic, with the hero fighting an unwinnable battle. In the words of Dale Wasserman's "Man from La Mancha", "to fight the unbeatable foe" is the fate of many heroes such as Surgul in Norse mythology or Hector in the Trojan War, and even those who win through find only a very Pyhrric victory, as Gilgamesh who must be satisfied with lasting fame rather than the immortality which he sought. Throughout the battles that

the hero must fight, the ideals of society are expressed either positively by the hero, or negatively as a flaw in the hero. It can, however, be taken for granted that the flaws, or what are considered lacks in the makeup of the hero, are outweighed by the virtues, so that the craftiness of Odysseus, his desire to avoid going to Troy because he has been informed that it will be 20 years before he gets back, are not exactly heroic in the eyes of the ancient Greeks, but they are understandable flaws, peccadillos that can be sympathized with and which make the hero more human, while the strength and bravery in the face of travail are the things that make Odysseus a hero.

It is a well-known fact that real people become heroes only to people who don't know them. As a "prophet is without honor in his own country," the guy next door is never anyone's hero. Most heroes become so posthumously, as many kings and presidents do, their deeds the subject of poets' paeans written long after their death; while others are fictionalized by people for whom they are a convenient fantasy, the Beatles for example; and still others are created by political propaganda, which can be said of many heads of state, especially those who show a firm determination to stay in power permanently. But even these heroes must express the ideals of the society in which they exist, otherwise they would not be heroes. Thus, one definition of a hero is "a person who by actions or mode of life expresses the ideals of some society or culture."

Perhaps the greatest heroes have been those that were responsible for the establishment of a religion: Abraham, Buddha, Jesus, Mohammed. The ideals of these historical heroes live on in many cultures: those of Abraham in the Jewish population spread throughout the world, Jesus primarily in European-based cultures; those of Mohammed in Arab cultures, and Buddha in Asian cultures. All other religions such as those in India, South, Central and North America, have their own heroes also which, while being mythical, express their ideals. But it should not be forgotten that the heroes of the Sumerians, Greeks, Egyptians and most other cultures were deeply involved with the religion of the people, objects of admiration much as those of the saints of the Christians, if not of worship as gods or demigods.

It follows, then, that the study of heroes in literature and mythology can be one source of discovering what a particular culture values highest, what its ideals are. With this in mind, we will examine a few of the many heroes of the world as they appear in literature and mythology and draw some conclusions about the values of the culture by which they were produced. And we may then, in so far as possible, attempt to test these conclusions from historical sources and observations. Since the founders of religions are heroes who cross the boundaries of several cultures, while the ideals they express may well show the differences in values between large blocks of cultures such as East, Mideast and West, the differences in culture are defined by the differences in interpretation of the religious doctrines and tend to indicate differences in the values even within the same religion. Describing the difference between Christianity as it is

usually thought of in Italy and in the U.S. is perhaps one way of distinguishing the American and Southern European cultural ideals, but here there is a necessity of describing the difference in interpretation of the actions of the hero involved.

Here we should examine the hero's actions and we can assume the hero represents, by definition, an ideal of the society, so we may discover the ideals of that society and compare them to those of other cultures or to those of our own.

## 1. GILGAMESH

Gilgamesh begins as a very rude and self-centered monarch of Uruk who is described as very beautiful, strong and courageous while also not caring how his actions affect others. The people complain about him to the gods saying, among other things that, while as king he has the right to sleep with a bride on the first night of her marriage, he has abused and extended this privilege.

The gods produce another man equal in strength to Gilgamesh who will teach him a bit of humility and, at the same time, become his friend. After the first confrontation, Enkidu, the new hero, and Gilgamesh get along well but soon Gilgamesh decides to go and fight the giant Humbaba who guards the cedars of Lebanon.<sup>2)</sup> Gilgamesh says that since he has to die sooner or later, before he does he wants to make a name for himself that will last. Enkidu is not fond of the idea but agrees to go along out of friendship.

The two cooperate to kill Humbaba, first chopping down one of his cedars then, with the the help of the god Shamash, cutting off his head.

When they return to Uruk the goddess Ishtar sees Gilgamesh and invites him to marry her. Gilgamesh, however, rejects her, listing all those she has loved before and ruined, telling her that she is like "the shoe that pinches, the palace that crushes the king within, the pitch that blackens anyone who carries it, the elephant that shakes off the carpet, the waterskin that soaks the one who carries it, etc. etc." This, naturally makes Ishtar angry, and she gets her father, Anu, to lend her the Bull of Heaven.<sup>3)</sup>

Gilgamesh kills the bull much in the manner of a modern matador with a sword into the neck, and makes the horns of the bull a trophy for his bedroom. Meanwhile, Enkidu has a dream foretelling his own death for stealing the cedars of Lebanon. At first he despairs, but then becomes resigned and finally dies, while regretting that he does not die as a real hero in battle. Gilgamesh grieves and then begins to fear that he will be just like Enkidu, going to the House of Darkness and Dust from which no man returns. He then decides to go see Utanapishtim who has the secret of eternal life. After much travail and many adventures he finds the fishwife, Siduri, who tells him where to find Utnapishtim across the sea, but tells him that his search is impossible and he would best live it up while he has the chance. But Gilgamesh induces Urshanabi, an early version of Charon, the rower across the Styx, to take him across the Waters of Death, and eventually he gets to talk to Utanapishtim and ask him how it is that

he only, of all mortal men, can live forever.

Here Utanapishtim relates the story of the flood and his part in it. This flood seems to be the source of that in Genesis of the Bible and Utanapishtim the forerunner of Noe.<sup>4)</sup> The reason for the flood of Utanapishtim is a bit different from the Bible, however. Enil, king of the gods, says that humans have become too numerous and a bit noisy and have begun to disturb his sleep. Not all the gods and goddesses agree with his plan to destroy mankind by flooding it out. Ea, the god who had taught humans how to plow and grow grain, appeared to Utanapishtim and told him to make a giant ship and take his relatives, the craftsmen of the town and the seed of all living things onto it. The ship he constructs is called an "Ark," in the manner of Noe's. In the end, Enil, at first disturbed to find that a human has escaped, finds most of the gods not too pleased with his having destroyed almost all the human world since this leaves fewer humans to do the work for the gods or to worship them.<sup>5)</sup> He therefore bestows eternal life upon Utanapishtim and his wife.

This is, unfortunately, no solution for Gilgamesh, who will not be able to get the gods to grant him a similar boon. He undergoes a test to prove he has the strength of the gods but fails it miserably and, chastened, starts back to Uruk. He learns from Utanapishtim the whereabouts of the plant which will keep him young, if not alive, forever. He gets the plant but has it stolen and eaten by a serpent who thereby benefits from its properties.<sup>6)</sup> Gilgamesh returns to Uruk, strong-walled Uruk, understanding that he must live on only in the memories of his people.

## 2. Gilgamesh and the Matriarchal Society

The Gilgamesh epic contains the relics of a matriarchical society which has become a patriarchy. The background of the quarrel with Ishtar when she wishes to marry him and he refuses, harks back to the era when the agricultural societies were governed by a chief priestess who was responsible for the bringing of life to the earth every year. The Great Goddess as a source of human life and food was the central figure in these societies and she was worshipped as that source. The priestess or queen was her representative. Originally the male role in procreation was not understood, but as it became so, the male was selected each year through various means to be the consort of the queen for the year. This male was responsible for the seed to fertilize the whole earth, and as such, at the end of the year was sacrificed, sometimes eaten, and his blood sprinkled on the land so that it would become fertile. The previous husbands that Gilgamesh accuses Ishtar of killing is a reference to these sacrificed kings, and it supplies sufficient reason why Gilgamesh would want to refuse marriage to the goddess. It may also explain in part the preoccupation of Gilgamesh with death.

As bloodthirsty as these customs may seem, they were the chief religious

observance of the society and the young men of the tribes would train to become strong so that they could compete in the contests, the winner of which would become the ill-fated king, consort to the queen. These competitions, according to many authorities, were the origins of the Olympic games of Greece, and thus the forerunners of the modern Olympic Games.

As the consort kings gradually took more power for themselves, they came to supply a substitute for the sacrifice every year. Enkidu dies as a substitute for Gilgamesh who, after all, was responsible for killing Humbaba, refusing Ishtar and killing the Bull of Heaven, the sins for which Enkidu is punished. The substitute sacrifice is called a "tanist" by Robert Graves in his treatise on Greek Myths, "tanist" being a Celtic term for substitute, or temporarily elected king.<sup>7)</sup> Enkidu is the epitomal tanist. He not only dies for the sins of the king, Gilgamesh, but is told by Shamash after he has had a dream which reveals his coming death to him,

"Enkidu, why do you curse the woman of the temple? She gave you food worthy of the gods and drink worthy of royalty. She clothed you with fine garments....

"And has not Gilgamesh treated you like a king? He has given you a royal bed on which to sleep ... When you die, he will make the people of Uruk weep over you ...."<sup>8)</sup>

Gradually, kings gained the central power, or the societies were invaded by other outside tribes which worshipped a Father, or Sky God. This was the case of the people of the Grecian peninsula who were conquered by Zeus-worshipping Achaeans descending upon them from the north and absorbing the goddess deities into their male-dominated pantheon.

Whether the Sumeria of Gilgamesh had been conquered by a patriarchal society or whether the tribe itself had overturned the rule of the Great Goddess cannot be determined, but, by the time of Gilgamesh it had become patriarchal, with remnants of the bygone matriarchal days. Gilgamesh is not the first of the patriarchs, since his father, the noble Lugalbanda, reigned for 1,200 years. Gilgamesh himself reigned for 126 years. Gilgamesh is the last of these ultra-long-reigning kings.<sup>9)</sup>

### 3. Gilgamesh the Builder

Throughout the story of Gilgamesh, his city of Uruk is never mentioned without the adjectival "strong-walled" being attached. Gilgamesh is also mentioned as the builder of those walls, as well as the architect of the temples of Anu and Ishtar, man's supreme achievement.

It would seem that the walls of Uruk are the thing that made Gilgamesh famous among his own people. It is mentioned that he has stone tablets placed on the strong walls of Uruk so that the people may remember him. As many kings after him, he is remembered for the buildings he has had constructed. Within the myth itself, one of his big adventures is to kill Humbaba who guards

the Cedars of Lebanon. Accomplishing this, he then cuts down the cedars, bundles them and brings them back to Uruk, presumably as building materials. As the pharaohs of Egypt have their names attached to the pyramids in which they are buried, and as Justinian and other emperors of the early Christian era are depicted as builders of churches, etc., so with Gilgamesh. Architecture has been one form of monument for kings, princes and would-be heroes since the first, apparently. The pope of Rome is known as the Pontifex in Latin, a term which means "bridge builder." The term, as used now, refers to the supposed intermediary role of the Pope, but was received from the high priests and emperors of ancient Rome and, while symbolic, helps indicate the importance put upon the idea of "building" by the Western World.

#### 4. Gilgamesh and the Gods

While the building of the walls of Uruk may have been the beginning of the legend of Gilgamesh, it soon developed into a full-fledged myth which included all the gods and goddesses of any ancient religion, many of whom can be recognized as the forerunners of Greek and Egyptian gods and goddesses. Ishtar is easily recognized as an ancestor of Aphrodite and Artemis, and Enil as that of Zeus. The theology, or the mythology, of course, did not develop from the story of Gilgamesh. Rather the reverse, the story of Gilgamesh was laid onto a background of previously existing mythology. There is no way of knowing when the gods and goddesses involved in the legend first came into existence, but they were certainly there before Gilgamesh himself. Though there is no written record of this mythology of Sumeria prior to the story of Gilgamesh, there can be no doubt that the gods and goddesses had long existed within the culture, at least in oral tradition.

The gods in many myths interfere in the affairs of men, and while many myths are concerned only with the gods and other super-human beings, the interplay between the gods and humans provides a basic theme in much mythology. In the Greek myths, humans usually make their appearance with Titan Prometheus and continue to take up more and more of the time of the gods. While the qualities of immortality and any magical properties of the gods and goddesses are not found in men, otherwise humans are the same as the gods, the objects of love, hate, aid and anger. Often men are pawns used in the intrigue of the gods among themselves, an outstanding example being the argument among Aphrodite, Athena and Hera over who is the most beautiful, which eventually results in the Trojan War.

Being the son of a goddess, Gilgamesh is in closer contact with the gods than other men and receives both their help and their hindrance. Gilgamesh finds himself in opposition to the gods and goddesses as well as being aided by them. When the people of the city complain that Gilgamesh is abusing his privileges, Nintu fashions Enkidu out of clay to teach Gilgamesh some humility. Meanwhile, Gilgamesh has his mother, Ninsun, interpret his dreams in which

he is informed of many things that are to happen. When Gilgamesh weeps at his fate, Shamash takes pity on him and promises to be his ally in the fight against Humbaba. After they have conquered Humbaba, Ishtar insists that he marry her, but when he refuses, she induces her father, Anu, to send the Bull of Heaven against Gilgamesh and Enkidu, who kill it, further incurring the wrath of the goddess. This leads to the death of Enkidu.

In any case, Gilgamesh demonstrates his position of being close to the gods and, while not capable of overcoming them in any sense, quite capable of influencing them. The constant interplay between men and gods is a necessary part of any mythology or religion. If gods were thought of as not being induced to do things at the bequest of men, most religions would shortly disappear. While there is a variance in the types of gifts expected from a god, the bottom line of religion is the credit that accrues to the believer. Thus, in the golden age of mythology, the influence of gods was seen in everything natural, and the entreaty of the gods the only way to change the otherwise mysterious processes continually going on around man. And it was in the folk stories, the moral tales, the myths, that men's influence worked in the surest fashion. The hero was the representative of humans in this interplay, and the hero's treatment of and by the gods and goddesses was, in effect, the assurance that humans could influence the divine.

Gilgamesh is an example of the hero representing humanity, even in its failings. In the end, he does not achieve the one overweening desire of man, immortality, but is then even more of a hero to the common man, having proved his unity with them. Being a hero is, in Greek mythology as well, an adjunct of being in close contact in one way or another, with a god. Oftentimes it means being the son of a god, but at least it usually means being allied with or opposed to a god. Gilgamesh is the son of a goddess, Ninsun, and a human father. He was fashioned by Nintu, the Great Mother Goddess; given beauty by Shamash, the god of the sun (Apollo?); Adad, god of storms, had given him courage; Ea, god of wisdom gave him the ability to become wise. One of basic problems of the Gilgamesh myth is that Gilgamesh is "god-like" but not a god, and must die like all other humans.

In the Bible the typical heroes, Moses, David, Samson, Jonah, etc. are all instruments of God, while also finding themselves in opposition to God in one way or another. Gilgamesh finds himself especially opposed to Ishtar whom he rejects because of her record of rapacious love. He accuses her of loving a stallion, then killing it, of turning her father's gardener into a mole, etc. But, in the end, he has erected a beautiful temple to Ishtar in his "strong-walled" city of Uruk. He, too, is another Job who must worship his gods and goddesses as part of his reason for existence.

##### 5. Gilgamesh and Death

Essentially, Gilgamesh is a tragic hero. His quest, like Don Quixote's, is

unreachable. Heroes, however, are predominantly tragic in Western mythology. Living happily ever after, while it may end the fairy tale, rarely ends the legend of a hero. Non-tragic heroes seldom reach center stage in cultural myths, even while having a great amount of peripheral popularity, the ultimate tragedy being death for the human, as expressed so directly and poignantly in the Gilgamesh epic. While the undying heroes would seem to be those which have achieved the greatest dreams of humanity, and therefore, the most outstanding, few heroes have escaped the disaster of death, although some have become gods. Heracles, for example, and others have been given a special paradise, such as Achilles and his colleagues from the Trojan War who are given an Eden in the farther reaches of the Black Sea where they can enjoy their after-life, or in the case of the Norse heroes, Valhalla.<sup>10)</sup> The Valhalla Eden of the Norse heroes affords them the daily opportunity to fight, i. e. to continue the life of the hero. The fact of death, and the courage in facing it are the basic ingredients of the heroes of myth.

Gilgamesh's prime motive in his search for Utanapishtim is the search for immortality, and this, indeed, eventually becomes the pervading theme in the Egyptian theology and the Judeo-Christian scriptures. The dissatisfaction of humans with their fate is thus transmitted to us from the earliest writings now decipherable and indicate the universality of the desire to escape death. But, by the same token, it is taken as an element of hero status that Gilgamesh, while striving for the unattainable, finally accepts this fate. This acceptance makes Gilgamesh somewhat different from the heroes of the Greek myths as they appear in the Trojan War tales attributed to Homer. In them heroes such as Achilles and Hector, and even Odysseus, know something of their fates before going into battle, but courage in battle is more important than the life they are to forfeit. It would seem that the Greeks had long before given up the quest for eternal life, while the Sumerians, living two thousand years earlier, were still not totally convinced that man could not somehow achieve it.

The desire to find a way to evade death has, of course, been one of the main forces behind the establishment and maintenance of most of the religions of the world from Buddhism to any of the smallest sects of Christianity. Curiously enough, the Jewish scriptures did not consider the evasion of death a viable hope until very late, seeing rather in the promises of Jaweh that they would become a great nation and prosper as their reward. Personal death was not involved much in their theology until the period of the Macchabees, only in the last century B. C. when, rather than referring to a life in another world, the belief in eventual resurrection of those who were faithful to God came about.

It was not until well into the Christian era that escape from the eternal effects of death was considered a possibility in the West, although the Egyptians and the Buddhists, among others, held this idea within their basic creed much earlier. The Christian era began with the belief in a resurrection for those who died before the soon to come return of Christ. When Christ did not return

before many of the faithful had already died, the belief in a life after death--with the soul living in heaven, or hell, or purgatory, separated from the body--came about. But this did not occur until very late into the second century.

Even with the escape from death thus promised, however, the bravery in meeting death was one of the main themes of Christian literature, especially in recounting the deaths of the martyrs who, by the very act of being put to death because of the refusal to renounce Christ, were able to attain immortality. The martyrs are, of course, the heroes of Christianity.

The chief lesson of the legend of Gilgamesh is that mankind should live courageously and be content with the fact of mortality. The fact of death is the central problem and the courage of Gilgamesh is demonstrated in his continued fight to find immortality. The search, as it is described, is a selfish one in which Gilgamesh seeks immortality for himself alone, and is repeatedly lectured by his fellow mortals as well as the gods for his impertinence in seeking something which is due only to the gods. It is, however, obvious that, as a hero, Gilgamesh receives the plaudits and prayers of the common man. It would seem that the Sumerians themselves felt the unfairness of the gods in limiting the years of life of mankind. The problem is not solved, but the protest of a people is certainly registered.

The fatalistic attitude of Gilgamesh is even more emphasized by the view of death as a total end, rather than as a transition to another world which is the prevalent escape hatch in most other religious systems. The high value the Sumerians placed upon human life only increased the despair at its loss, which would seem to form a motive for developing a mythical afterworld and a religious system which would supply a belief in the same, as found in most other religions at a later period.

## 6. Gilgamesh and Friendship

It would seem an anomaly that Gilgamesh should befriend Enkidu who was, after all, a construct of the gods made with the intention of teaching him humility. Enkidu was made of clay, the same as Adam, and lived with the beasts of the forest and field. When he and Gilgamesh meet, they fight like two "savage bulls." Eventually the fight ends in a draw and the two embrace in friendship.

Friendship of this sort, an admiration of the courage and strength of another, is a prevalent theme of hero myths. Heroes who meet and fight have, throughout history, revered one another in spite of the necessity of killing each other. In the Greek myths, invariably the heroic victor who, in single combat, kills another hero, pays special tribute to the vanquished and buries him with special honor. It is always a tribute to the courage, especially, and the strength of the vanquished. The tribute to the "strength" of the beaten contributes, of course, to the glory of the victor, but the "courage" seems to be an honest tribute to the valor and honor of the dead loser, a high evaluation of the "male" virtues of courage and honor which ensue from the ability to face the danger of death with

equanamity.

Enkidu mourns his loss of strength when he becomes civilized, that is, when he begins to live with Gilgamesh in luxury. Gilgamesh then suggests a cure which is to test their strength against Humbaba. Enkidu does not have the heart for this and Gilgamesh says that, in that case, he will do it alone. At which Enkidu accedes to the endeavor, his only reason for accompanying Gilgamesh being the bond of friendship, having expressed great fear at the power of Humbaba.

In any case, the friendship between these two heroes, or perhaps, Gilgamesh, hero, and straight man, Enkidu, is dependent upon displays of strength and courage. This theme is prevalent through the literature of the West down to the present day. The Western concept of "friendship" as the word is used even today, has a "manly" overtone, and is something that exists in its ideal state between males, not between females, or between people of the opposite sex. To express friendship between people of the opposite sex we affix the words "boy-" or "girl-" to "friend." And while "girlfriend" can conceivably be used to indicate friendship between women as well as between a woman and a man, "boyfriend" is never used to express a relationship between males. The word "friend," as well as the Latin word "amicus," both derive from words meaning "love" or "lovable." It is difficult to conjecture, however, whether the word had some hidden reference to a preference for male homosexual relationships which were not unusual in Greek and Roman times.

Friendship is a virtue which is rarely found between women in myths. The mother-daughter relationship of Demeter and Penelope, or the mistress-servant relationship of Artemis to her nymphs are frequent, and more often, the mutually-jealous relationship among Athena, Aphrodite and Hera. There is scarcely any mention throughout the Bible, (perhaps the closeness of Ruth and her mother-in-law, Naomi could, however, arguably be called "friendship"), the Greek or Roman myths, the Egyptian mythology, or the Hindu mythology, of two women who have a "friendship" in the manner of the heroes, in the manner of the "first" heroes, Gilgamesh and Enkidu.

Another aspect of the friendship is that of the king to his tanist. For the king to love his tanist might be considered an act of gratefulness for the sacrifice done in the king's stead, while the love of the tanist for the king may express his thankfulness at being literally treated like a king for a year. Whether such thoughts are valid or not is hard to imagine apart from the culture involved, but hero-friends are a facet of that period which do not find easy explanation in the present era.

## 7. The Strength of Gilgamesh

The common feature of the heroes of Greek and Sumerian mythology is fantastic strength. No one among the suitors of Penelope could come near achieving the feat of Odysseus in shooting an arrow through twelve ax rings,

in fact, none of them could even string the bow. Heracles is so strong that he helps out the gods of Olympus in their fight against the rebelling Titans. In the case of Gilgamesh, he is so strong that no one can stand against him until Enkidu comes along.

The tales of the strength of Gilgamesh have the familiar "Superman" ring to them. In the defeat of Humbaba, the two friends hack down the cedars of Lebanon rather easily, bundling them up and laying them at the foot of the mountain, much in the manner of Paul Bunyun of the American Pacific Northwest. When Gilgamesh gets to Humbaba, Gilgamesh pushes him up against the wall of his house and slaps his face and Humbaba pleads for his life, hardly what one would expect of the terrible ogre that had put such great fear into the heart of Enkidu. When the two friends dispatch the giant, his body hitting the ground echoes for six miles around.

Gilgamesh and Enkidu again display their prowess in overcoming the Bull of Heaven that jealous Ishtar sends against them. After the death of Enkidu, Gilgamesh, in his quest for the secret of eternal life performs more feats of strength, cutting, for example 120 poles 100 feet long from the forest to push the boat of Urshanabi across the Waters of Death. He also dives deep into the water using two stones tied to his feet so that he can gather the plant of eternal youth, and he performs other feats of incredible strength. If Gilgamesh displays any weakness, it is not being able to stay awake and on his feet through seven days and nights to prove to Utanaphishtim that he is as strong as the gods. Sleep, like death, is one thing that all humans undergo, and sleep may be counted here as a type of symbolic death.

## 8. Gilgamesh and Battle

Courage is of the essence of heroism as shown in the Greek and Norse myths as well as in Gilgamesh. The hero is such because he is strong and brave, but he demonstrates his strength by fighting others who are apparently stronger than himself in some way, the adverse odds demonstrating his courage. In the case of Gilgamesh, he does not take part in any large battles in the manner of Achilles or Hector at Troy. But even in these stories of the Greek heroes, the surrounding battle always forms but a background for the main action which is the combat between two heroes or of one hero against a multitude of foes.

Gilgamesh also proves his strength and bravery by fighting. The close relationship between heroism and fighting is seen in the fact that there is no other reason for Gilgamesh to fight Enkidu except that they seem of equal strength. There is no reason to go and fight Humbaba except that Gilgamesh wants to prove his heroism so that he will be remembered after he is gone.

While fighting demonstrates strength and courage, neither in Gilgamesh nor in the Greek myths is it necessarily accompanied by a higher motive, or even anger. While many ogres and villains are slain by heroes because they are creating some kind of evil, it can also be, as in the case of Gilgamesh, that the

motive for fighting is only to show strength and courage, the opponent being accidental to the purpose. This type of "quest" can be found in most Western myths and literature and perhaps reaches a climax in the literature of Chivalry, satirized with some sympathy for the ideal by Cervantes.

#### 9. Gilgamesh and Nobility

Undoubtedly, the legend of Gilgamesh developed from the story of Gilgamesh as a ruler, and perhaps builder of Uruk. Like many heroes, Gilgamesh is a ruler, which gives him a boost up the hero ladder, since legends tend to grow concerning those who are at the peak of the power pinnacle. There is a curious "chicken-egg" relationship between power and nobility, at least up until the age when democratic ideals began to deny the innateness of "nobility." Throughout Western history, (this is not to say that a similar trend cannot be found in other cultures), the ruler was "a" noble, a king or a queen or such, and at the same time "noble." To be born a princess was to have all the "noble" attributes such as feeling a pea through 12 mattresses. That is to say that heroes and rulers were born and not made. This, in fact, is a major theme throughout all mythology which dictates that wonderful things necessarily happen concerning the birth of a hero. The Gilgamesh legend is quite short compared to other later myths, simply because time has unquestionably buried most of it, but even so, his nobility is attested to by his birth from the union between a goddess and a human. He is described as being "two-thirds" god and "one-third" man. The method by which this fraction is arrived at clearly involves a higher type of mathematics, and the background of his power and nobility are thus established.

Throughout mythology, even those heroes who seem to come, in a sense, "from the ranks," are often shown to have been the children of queens or princesses or gods or goddesses or otherwise miraculously conceived. The Judeo-Christian literature is as filled with this device as is Greek or Roman mythology. Achilles, Heracles, Theseus, Romulus and Remus, Isaac, John the Baptist, and of course, Jesus Christ, were all sons of queens or goddesses or gods, or conceived with the special help of God. The story of Moses from the Bible in which a boy from a poor slave family is raised in the house of a king seems to be the reverse of this but still establishes the bond between the apparent "noble" and the Hebrews to whom Moses becomes attached.<sup>11)</sup>

Thus, the hero is not like other men, even from birth, the quality of heroism being innate. This, in a sense, removes the ordinary person from the field of competition with the hero and also provides an excuse to remove oneself from overexposure to danger.

#### 10. Gilgamesh and Courage

A highly valued virtue, courage existed for the Sumerians in the person who would test his strength against any opponent. It was a manly virtue, which used to be a tautology since the word "virtue" itself derives from the Latin

word "manliness," and the muscular strength involved precluded its presence in a woman.<sup>13)</sup> It is strange to note that the word "virtue" now has a feminine connotation and is sometimes even used as a synonym for feminine chastity. It was concerned with fighting against odds and not with any particular moral righteousness.

In going against Humbaba, Gilgamesh shows his courage by the way in which he insists on undertaking the task in spite of the fears of Enkidu and others, although the task itself has no other purpose than to enable Gilgamesh to make a name for himself. In a sense, the essence of courage, the overcoming of fear, is shown here by Gilgamesh.

### Conclusion

The Sumeria of Gilgamesh had recently, perhaps over a period of several centuries, turned from matriarchy to patriarchy. Its gods and goddess show a lack of clarity over who has supremacy: the god Anu is the ruler of the gods with Enil, but shows a distinct lack of will to stand up to Ishtar who is supposed to be his daughter and who is also a Great Goddess or Mother Goddess. The rejection of Ishtar's advances by Gilgamesh indicate a rebellion, on one hand, against the domination of the matriarchy. It rejects the cruelty shown toward the husbands or consorts of Ishtar. On the other hand, Gilgamesh is shown as seeking counsel from his mother, also a goddess as well as a priestess of Shamash, the god who protected travelers, etc. Gilgamesh is also known for his buildings, among which he is particularly proud of the temple of Ishtar in Uruk.

There is a dichotomy which places final power in the hands of the male gods while, at the same time, places the powers of life and fertility, and sometimes death, in the hands of the female goddess. Through the Middle Ages and even down to the present in many parts of Europe, the place given to the "Mother" of God, the Virgin Mary, within the Christian Churches would seem to be a close parallel with this earliest of historical societies, attributing absolute power to a male principle but reserving the factors concerning birth and fertility to the female. While Mary of the Christian faith is not accused of the extermination of the king, she is a constant figure in the Christian Scriptures and tradition throughout the narratives of the death and resurrection of Christ.

The search of Gilgamesh for immortality strikes the most sympathetic chord of response in the present era. It would seem though, in contrast to most of the religions of today, the Sumeria of Gilgamesh had little hope in a life after death. Though the "House of Darkness and Dust" is mentioned, it hardly seems to Gilgamesh to be a substitute for life. As mentioned above, this seemed to be the conclusion drawn by most early cultures including the Greeks and the Jews, although the Egyptians were, in contrast, obsessed with the life after death and the ways to ensure its attainment.

Gilgamesh is an early look at many tendencies that were to become stronger in time: "virtue" attached to the male, his strength, courage in battle; friend-

ship arising from admiration of physical strength and beauty; honor taken to mean the honesty to the code of being courageous; imposing architecture for the purpose of making this honor more permanent; the belief that there are people who are "better" by birth, who are "well born."

Some of these tendencies can be traced down to the present day and are evident in Western cultural values, others have been modified, and more recently some have become disreputable. To speak of "noble" birth today is hardly popular. Unconsciously, however, we continue to place a social value on inheritance which has no possible scientific explanation. These and other values will be traced further as we continue to look at the heroes of mythology.

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#### *Footnotes*

1. Rosenberg, Donna; *World Mythology*. (London : Harrap, 1986); pp. 181-3.
2. The cedars of Lebanon were prized for more than a thousand years afterwards into the Judaic biblical periods of the third and fourth centuries B. C.
3. Lending this bull results in seven years of famine, an echo of the seven years of famine found in Joseph's warning to the Pharaoh in the Old Testament.
4. It is thought that there was a real flood which had devastating effects in the southern Mesopotamia delta area around 2,900 B. C. (Rosenberg, p. 182).
5. Humans, in much mythology, are created for the purpose of working for the gods and worshipping them. Job, of the Bible, for example, finds that the reason for his existence is not to receive things from God, but simply to adore Him.
6. In Genesis, Adam and Eve lost the gift of immortality because of a serpent. At the same time, the serpent, in most mythology, is considered the carrier of renewed life rather than of evil. This probably derives from the idea that when it shed its skin it was considered to have renewed its life. Witness the use of the snake as a symbol of health by the Greeks from whom we have inherited the symbol of medical practice of two snakes twined around a tree.
7. Graves, Robert; *The Greek Myths* (Middlesex, Penguin Books, 1955) pp. 18-20.
8. Resenberg, p. 200.
9. Long life of past heroes is a common attribute of many of the patriarchs and mythological ancestors. The early men of the Genesis all had extremely long lives, Mathusala who lived over 900 years being an outstanding example.
10. Davidson, H. R. Ellis; *Gods and Myths of Northern Europe* (Middlesex, England, Penguin Books, 1964) pp. 149-153.
11. Freud also shows logically that the customs drawn in the episode surrounding the birth of Moses as found in the Bible are drawn with just this purpose in mind, using the customary mechanism of miraculously saving the exposed child from death to make the connection between the hero and the Hebrews. He suggests that Moses was really an official in the court of Akhnaton, the Egyptian Pharaoh of the 15th century B. C. who attempted to unify all the Egyptian gods into one god, "Ra." When Akhnaton died, the priests forced his son Tutankhamen to return to the former religion, at which Moses fled with some believers in the "One True God" into the Sinai Peninsula where they were eventually identified with the Hebrews, the "Hibrit" tribes who were at that time invading the Palestine area. Campbell, Joseph; *Occidental Mythology, The Masks of God* (Middlesex, England, Penguin Books,

1964) pp. 125-130.

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